

What really is NLP ?

Yes, yes, but what *really* is NLP ?

Ask someone who has heard of NLP, and what do they say?

Some people mention **Paul McKenna**, the TV personality who 'changes people': "I Can Make You Thin," "I Can Make You Rich", as his books claim. He studied NLP. Some mention **Anthony Robbins** whose bestselling self-help books and persuasive fire-walking large-crowd seminars have made him millions. His early work was based on NLP. Some people talk about the TV magician **Derren Brown** who deceives people, plays tricks, and manipulates. He learned many of his skills from NLP.

Some people give you the full title, Neuro-Linguistic-Programming, but then tell you that it isn't really about linguistics any more, that it's not the scientific study of neuro-linguistics either, and that it's certainly not about programming anyone or anything!

And on the other hand, there's a large number of people who will tell you that NLP is about as far from manipulation as you can get; that it changed their own life immeasurably for the better. And they are not talking just about thinking skills: they say that they feel happier, more capable, more effective, more understanding, more generous, more grateful ... wiser.

It's all a bit confusing...

The truth is that NLP is not just one thing. It's a whole miscellany. So let me start by giving you a few examples of NLP in practice and then tell you how it emerged and developed.

Examples of an NLP approach

Example 1 Imagine you want to become excellent at a sport – tennis for instance. So you watch a top tennis player. You see the movements of the body, the speed of reaction; you hear the clean sound of the racquet hitting the ball dead centre. Watching a match, you become aware of the consistency of play and might begin to understand the game strategy. If you want to play well, you copy what you witness, or you get an expert to help you reproduce what you have seen. But if you limit yourself to that, you are missing a large part of what makes that player excellent. And that is all the elements crucial for success that you *can't* see or hear: what is going on inside the player's head, heart and gut. When the player urgently needs to win a point to stay in the game, what gives that focus, that

steadiness of mind, that strength of will, that confidence in the outcome? That is the subject matter of NLP.

Example 2 Two people are unwell. They both receive the same medical treatment. One believes he is going to get better, and imagines the state of being well and everything he has to look forward to. The other is scared and pessimistic and believes the doctor when he says that recovery may be long and difficult. Intuitively you know which one will recover faster. Research and the practical experience of medical staff demonstrate that attitude and beliefs have an important role to play not only in recovery but in maintaining health. NLP provides tools and concepts to understand what really makes the difference in health and many other areas in our life, and how to change our attitude and beliefs.

Example 3 The leader of an organisation turns it around; profits soar and the people thrive. You witness the decisions made, the actions taken and the strategies realised. But how does this leader generate the loyalty and motivation that she does? You then notice that the leader uses different language, energy and body language when she talks to different people. You seek to find out why and look for patterns in her behaviour. Perhaps one of the components you discover is a consistent positive regard for her people, so you note that as one of the possible elements of her success, and test it further. That is the NLP approach.

So what are the beginnings of NLP?

It started out as a study of the language used by effective therapists. **Richard Bandler**, a student at the University of California, Santa Cruz, transcribed taped therapy sessions of the Gestalt therapist **Fritz Perls** to discover what it was about Perls' language that enabled clients to accept his positive suggestions. He consulted one of his lecturers, linguistic professor **John Grinder**, who offered to help him understand Perls' language patterns. They also studied the language of the family therapist **Virginia Satir**. Together they produced a model of influential word structures called the Meta Model. They claimed that once you knew the structure of these therapists' language, anyone could learn it and achieve similar results.

Later they were encouraged to examine the work of the psychiatrist and hypnotherapist **Milton Erickson**, who was doing something entirely different with language. This led to the Milton Model.

It developed into a more general communication model

Based on these discoveries, they and a small team of people around them applied the learning to the world of communication in general, and built up a whole raft of techniques for learning and change which grew rapidly.

Their skill was particularly in noticing patterns, building them into a model and then presenting this in elegantly simple terms from which others could learn easily. Many of these models form part of good NLP courses today. The scope of NLP spread beyond therapy to general personal effectiveness development, business, systems thinking, sales, health and wellbeing, education and sports.

Modelling

As NLP progressed, the method they were using to learn from the therapists – ‘modelling’ – became recognised by many as the ‘core’ of NLP. Many people now describe NLP as the **‘modelling of excellence’**.

It’s a method of discovering how anyone produces excellence. How do such people use their five senses externally and internally; what are their patterns of thinking, feeling and behaviour; what do they do sub-consciously that is an essential part of the process?

Once these are discovered, the material is simplified into the least number of elements essential for success, and then put in the form that is most easy to teach to others.

Expansion

Once NLP became focused on its method, modelling, it grew uncontrollably into a diverse, rapidly expanding accumulation of practical knowledge with tendrils into every sphere of human endeavour.

NLP has no basic theory. It’s based on models that work in practice. The models are not true or false, they either work – are useful – or don’t – aren’t useful. One of the early developers, **Robert Dilts**, says *“If it’s working, it’s NLP.”*

Today

Various attempts have been made to regulate NLP as a discipline, but it defies them. Many variants of NLP appear in trainings, books and multi-media programmes, and the depth and scope of training and standards vary widely too. Much of the original NLP has been developed and given other names. Some trainers consider it a precise body of knowledge; others see it as a freely expanding field of innovation. Such lack of discipline can be frustrating, but maybe this continual experimentation and new discovery and refusal to be standardised can be seen as healthy. It has certainly produced some powerfully effective models and processes.

What are the strengths of NLP?

NLP processes are simple and practical: they are about the difference that makes the difference. They can be brilliantly effective.

NLP is about fundamental human thinking and behaving and can be applied to many different disciplines and in many different contexts.

Study of NLP increases awareness of the world around and of the world within. It encourages individual curiosity and enquiry. It questions *everything*. If an doctor claims that recovery will be long and hard, NLP would ask, is that *really* true?

Through NLP people learn how to change not only behaviours but beliefs as well. Since beliefs about our own possibilities present the biggest block to success, this makes it a powerful agent of change.

NLP doesn't claim to be a particular "-ism", or church, or philosophy. It is just a process of closely observing what people do and are, especially those who are excellent in some field of endeavour, and learning from that. We can then use that learning in any way that we wish – to expand our own awareness, to free ourselves from what hinders us and become more of who we can be, or to help others in these areas if they want it.

Just that. Just learning how we can be joyful and magnificent!

Find out more

To find out more about NLP, why not sign up for our e-course – **Understanding NLP**. See the website at www.voiceofinfluence.co.uk for details.

© Judy Apps

Judy Apps is creator of 'Voice of Influence' and Founder and Director of Enlightened Ltd.

She runs **Voice of Influence** workshops in London and elsewhere, and offers leadership, voice and presentation coaching.

Visit her website at www.voiceofinfluence.co.uk to learn more about how she can help you find your voice and perform with confidence and impact, and get her FREE e-courses – "The 10 Secrets for Overcoming Performance Anxiety", "How to Perform with Authority" and "Understanding NLP".